



Transcript for “Crime Fiction”

An Audio Program from *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*

Interviewer Maiben Beard and Dr. Christopher Keirstead of Auburn University discuss crime fiction. This transcript has been edited for readability.

Ms. Beard: Welcome to *This Goodly Land's* audio program about crime fiction. I'm Maiben Beard. We are talking today with Dr. Christopher Keirstead of the Auburn University Department of English.

It's good to have you with us today, Dr. Keirstead.

Dr. Keirstead: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ms. Beard: Why do we enjoy crime fiction so much?

Dr. Keirstead: We certainly do enjoy it, that's without a doubt. It's one of the most popular genres of fiction and probably for several reasons, one of them being that crime fiction in many ways gets to the very essence of what people like about any kind of fiction or any kind of reading. If we read for pleasure, crime fiction gives certain pleasures to the reader, the most obvious one being plot.

If you read for plot, crime fiction, and particularly detective fiction, has a puzzle that the reader is invited to solve—follow along with the clues, follow along with the detective—so automatically you have a situation that can have a very gripping plot that holds the reader's attention. We also like to read for a goal of some kind, and detective fiction is known in particular for its resolutions, for its endings. So there is a certain satisfaction that readers get out of going along with this puzzle and solving the puzzle.

But I also think that's not the only pleasure it gives. Some of the most memorable characters from fiction are detectives—police detectives or amateur detectives—and they have certain character traits that readers remember and latch on to. So that's another thing that keeps people coming back to the genre in general. Another key component is setting, and often a particular author or detective is associated with a specific setting or a particular city even. So, on those three levels I'd say—plot, character, and setting—crime fiction and detective fiction have particularly good things to offer.

And some other things as well: there are social reasons maybe that people turn to crime fiction. It has sometimes been said that, in a world that lacks order or that can be very confusing, we like these plots that do resolve things for us at the end (although not all crime fiction does that). But I think one writer said something to the effect that, if there's not going to be any order to the world outside, then maybe we should have it in our fiction instead.

Ms. Beard: Has it always been as popular as it is today?

Dr. Keirstead: Well, it has certainly been consistently popular since around the turn of the Twentieth Century, from about the time when Arthur Conan Doyle originated the Sherlock Holmes mysteries. Although the genre predates Sherlock Holmes, from about the turn of the Twentieth Century onward, it has been consistently popular. When you think of the names everyone associates with crime and detective fiction, Agatha Christie for instance or some of the hardboiled detective novels later, these were consistently popular, and they were also popular in the form of magazines. Later, once they were transferred to radio and television, I think that only helped to sustain the popularity. So it's probably only rivaled in the Twentieth Century by espionage fiction, which in some ways grows out of detective fiction as well.

Ms. Beard: Tell us something about the origins of crime fiction and how it evolved through the years.

Dr. Keirstead: You could say that crime as a theme or occurrence in literature has been there from the start, maybe going back to things like *Oedipus the King* or even the Bible, there's plenty of crime (Cain and Abel). So we have crime, but when people talk about crime or detective fiction, there are certain specific traits associated with it that we don't really begin to see until the middle of the Nineteenth Century. We might have had different elements, we might have had murder, we might have had mystery as to who was going to solve the murder, we might have had some of those traits, but probably the key development is the idea of the detective.

There's a crime established at the beginning of the story. There's a detective, at first an amateur detective, usually someone who has greater powers of reason or intuition than the police, and he or she is the person who solves the crime. Most scholars agree that Edgar Allen Poe is actually the first person who can be said to have written a genuine detective story called "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Following that, in the Nineteenth Century, there were other what we would call detective stories being written, and you can mention several particular authors. Maybe Anna Katharine Green who wrote *The Leavenworth Case* in 1878 would be one example.

But it probably wasn't until Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of the Sherlock Holmes mysteries at the turn of the century, that you start to see crime fiction gaining the consistent popularity that it would have up through the Twentieth Century, and you can make a kind of loose trajectory from there. You're always going to have the amateur detective stories, and this is the focus of the genre from the turn of the century to what is

sometimes called the “Golden Age” of crime and detective fiction between World War I and World War II. Think of people like Agatha Christie or Dorothy Sayers, some of the key authors of that period.

American crime fiction novels, particularly the hardboiled detective novels (Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler), are sometimes seen as being written in response to those kinds of stories, focusing more on city life, in some ways getting back to the origins of crime fiction, which began in urban environments. Going from there, you could say that, continuing in that setting, in the United States at least, we start to see what are called police procedurals, moving away from the private detective and into the police department itself. There are numerous sub-genres as well, but I think those are recognized as the major trends in the field.

Ms. Beard: Can you tell us a little about the important sub-genres?

Dr. Keirstead: Yes, in fact one of the things that makes crime fiction so enjoyable for readers is the way that it works within certain sub-genres but is still able to be creative with them.

For instance, one sub-genre is called the “country estate” mystery, associated with Agatha Christie. Those kinds of mysteries actually had very rigid rules that you were supposed to follow. In fact, there was a Father Knox who came up with a list of “Ten Commandments” of things that all writers of mysteries should observe. There was another group called the Detection Club, a group of mystery writers, and they all agreed to adhere to these rules of what were called “fair play.” Just to give a couple of examples, the detective for instance could not be the perpetrator of the crime. There could be no identical twins unless it was clearly established at the beginning that they were twins. So people came to recognize these rules within sub-genres, and that rewarded some of the pleasure that they got out of the reading.

Another sub-genre (related) would be the “locked room” mystery where a crime has happened and it appears that there is no way for a killer to have gotten in or out. I’ll just mention another one. One sub-genre that seems to have become particularly popular in the last twenty-five years is the historical crime fiction setting. You have a mystery or a detective, maybe set back as far back as the Middle Ages, such as *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco. So it’s a thriving, very innovative, field in the types of sub-genres associated with it.

Ms. Beard: What are some of the landmark works?

Dr. Keirstead: In addition to the ones that I mentioned, you could associate each sub-genre with a particular work that initiated it or, if it wasn’t the first one, had most of the traits that you would associate with that particular sub-genre. To give you an example of what is called the police procedural, Ed McBain is usually credited with writing one of the first, if not the first, police procedural called *Cop Hater* in 1956, writing the work that established the rules of the genre that people follow.

Just some of the other key ones that I mentioned before: I mentioned Poe—"The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is generally considered to be the first one. Agatha Christie has written so many that it may be hard to pinpoint which one in particular established her reputation, but certainly *Murder on the Orient Express* or *Ten Little Indians*—I can point to these titles. One author I will mention, that isn't read as much perhaps as she should be, is Susan Glaspell who wrote a short story that became a play or rather vice versa, entitled "A Jury of Her Peers," which was one of the first stories to feature a pair of women detectives solving the case that the male police force seemed mostly baffled by.

Ms. Beard: What are the most common motifs in crime novels?

Dr. Keirstead: To go back to what I said about a standard structure of the detective story (the plot involving the crime or the puzzle), most of the common motifs we associate with it grow out of that. A lot of it comes down to "how do you ...," the questions that would explore how do you solve crimes, what's important to you as a reader to notice. One of the things I stress about, one of the things I enjoy about, crime fiction is that it mirrors the way all reading happens. Whether you're reading crime fiction or any kind of fiction, there are things that are important to you as a reader, and there are things that you pay attention to.

As you read crime fiction, one of the things you are being taught is what to pay attention to, what's important. For instance, a common motif is the false suspect or the person who, whether because of the evidence available or in many cases because of their social position (perhaps they're being stereotyped), there might be a tendency to reach for them as the first suspect. A lot of times what crime and detective fiction does is it warns us against jumping to conclusions. The detective as our hero models certain ways of detection, obviously, of making judgments, of sorting through the different types of evidence. So the theme is associated with "how do you read?"

Then, also, something that keeps coming up is obviously questions of justice and ethics. One of the most important parts of any mystery novel, of course, is the solution, the last scene or the denouement. In many cases, what you have there is you have the resolution of the themes or issues that the novel is bearing up to. Has it said anything about the causes of the crime? Does the right person get arrested? Are the guilty punished? Are the innocent rewarded? As we know in real life, those are very complicated issues, and I think crime and detective fiction reflects that complexity in many ways.

Ms. Beard: Can we see national differences in crime fiction, for example, American writers vs. British writers?

Dr. Keirstead: Yes, definitely. Like any kind of fiction, a particular author gets associated with a specific setting (or a specific moment in history as well), in many cases because crime fiction depends so much on creating an evocative setting or an evocative historical moment that reflects a particular time in history. So, for instance, the "Golden Age" of

detective fiction associated with Great Britain between the wars very much reflects a wish to get back to the countryside (although in many cases we have problems with the city invading the countryside).

There is a wish to go back to that idea of England in the past, compared to American fiction, the hardboiled detective novel, for which its key settings are cities like, say, Chicago and in particular Los Angeles. You could see those in many authors, like Raymond Chandler for instance, who saw himself as writing against the British authors of the time. You could say the heroes of Chandler's novels, like Philip Marlowe, represent pretty much the American idea of heroism, which comes from Westerns, Western stories, in many ways.

Those are two differences, although I might say what is happening now is, it's almost (particularly with British and Americans) the similarities that may be more astonishing. In very many ways, it's almost a transatlantic genre. For instance, police dramas, urban thrillers, British and American fiction, and the television and film that grow out of it are almost equally marketable across the Atlantic because in some ways we're dealing with the same things. If there's one thing that's common to a lot of these settings, it's the problems of modern mass urban culture. You have those, of course, across the globe, but it's seeing how another culture deals with that which is part of the pleasure or interest of the genre.

Ms. Beard: There are many literary works in which crime plays a role but which are not considered crime fiction. What sets "crime fiction" apart from these works?

Dr. Keirstead: You could say there's no particular reason why a mystery novel couldn't be a literary work or have literary qualities to it. But I think you're right, there's a certain set of expectations we have for detective fiction as opposed to literature. And it might be useful to think about, well, what crime stories *do* we think of as literature.

Think of, for instance, something like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which generally isn't associated with crime literature, in part because the crime doesn't take center stage. It's not just reading for the plot to solve the mystery. The author emphasizes other things of importance. For instance, I would say maybe one criticism you could make of a lot of popular crime fiction is that there's not a lot of attention to the social causes of crime or the social or political dimensions of what creates crime and what affects the police force. But in literature, perhaps, there's more attention to that wider perspective.

Also some basic differences too: a lot of crime fiction is marketed as crime fiction (it's in a specific section of your bookstore for instance), whereas I think a lot of the literary works are using crime perhaps to explore other kinds of issues. Another good example might be *Crime and Punishment*, where again the title certainly sets it up as mystery or detective fiction, but we don't think of it that way because the focus isn't so much on solving a mystery. I mean, we know the murder that has happened, and it's quite clear that it's more about the inner turmoil of the perpetrator Raskolnikov, and the focus isn't

so much on how is he going to get caught, but the results of that capture, how he assesses himself and his crime, and how he builds remorse.

Ms. Beard: How have social and cultural issues been reflected in crime novels?

Dr. Keirstead: In a lot of ways it goes back to, like I was saying, the urban origins of the crime novel. Much of what we think of as crime, we think of it primarily as a problem that happens in the big cities. That is true of Poe even (his story is set in Paris) and then Holmes, who is very much associated with London. I think one of the reasons Sherlock Holmes appealed to its original readers was that he was somebody who was solving problems that seemed very difficult and intractable to society at the time.

We had the sprawling metropolis of London with millions of people, people coming in from other parts of the world, very sharp class divisions as well. Maybe it was comforting to readers, in some ways, to think that there was one person who could manage all those problems, who could solve these difficult mysteries, who could see things clearly. You might say that's his great skill. So you have that great detective, he's very much a scientist as well, and we need Watson in there perhaps, to humanize him a little bit more.

So crime fiction can be seen as providing some kind of solution, or maybe imagined solutions, to these problems of society. In part because of that, some of the social issues that deal with issues of racial difference or gender issues are very much, almost from its beginnings, observable in crime and detective fiction and not always in very positive ways. For instance, the hardboiled detective genre is sometimes criticized for presenting a very misogynistic view of women, that it was about celebrating a kind of male hero who could take control of a lot of the social strife and problems of the time. Another criticism that could be made of it was that presenting, say, social problems represented an anxiety about immigration or issues like that. Not true across the board, but I think in that way, for good or worse, crime or detective fiction represents the society that it comes out of.

Ms. Beard: In the past, most fictional detectives were white males. This has been changing over the last few decades. Can you tell us something about this phenomenon?

Dr. Keirstead: I could mention several authors and, going back to what I was just saying, you might be surprised that a genre that seems so dominated by white male writers could translate so well or could attract authors with a very different set of interests, but it has.

For instance, women detectives and creating a woman detective who was not just Philip Marlowe dressed as a woman, someone who had a different set of concerns, who could detect crimes differently, who was emphasizing different sorts of clues. P. D. James is usually credited with creating the first genuine woman detective. In fact, the title of that book was called *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. Since then, there are numerous woman authors who have made a good career and reputation featuring detectives like Kinsey Millhone. This is Sue Grafton's private eye, and many readers might recognize her titles. They are based on certain letters of the alphabet, like *A is for Alibi*. She wanted to create a detective who faced the same kinds of problems as a hardboiled detective but coped

with crimes in a different way, maybe related to her clients and her suspects differently, and not just terms of gender but also race as well.

An author I admire in particular is Walter Mosley, and probably his most famous book is *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which again took the hardboiled genre. But it's from the perspective of an African-American who's returning from the war, from World War II, and is caught up in a plot very similar to what you might see in *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler. So it's a genre that, maybe because of its flexibility with plot, setting, and character, can be something that reveals particular aspects of the culture. It's very effective at that.

One more example I would give would be Tony Hillerman's two detectives who are working on a Navajo reservation. Those stories are very much about negotiating the border between, you might say, the big city or the establishment and native culture, and each is a character who's asked to negotiate those two kinds of borders. One of the things I like about it is, it's a window into different cultures and the struggles of minorities gaining recognition. I think there's a lot to be learned from crime and detective literature.

Ms. Beard: How have the attitudes of scholars and critics towards crime fiction changed over the years?

Dr. Keirstead: In general, you could say that they're a little more attentive to it than they used to be. I think crime and detective fiction that was by well-established literary authors like Poe has always received a fair amount of attention. But as a whole, crime and detective literature is getting more attention, maybe in part because of the greater acceptance there is now studying popular culture as an object of study—not as something that's incidental to culture but as something that in fact shapes our attitudes towards many kinds of things. So crime and detective literature—if you want a window into what people's cultural anxieties are, you couldn't really go to a better example of that.

I'd also say, with greater attention now to movies and visual culture as well, because crime and detective fiction has worked so well with movies and film, it has almost become hard not to talk about it in some ways. Many times for instance, if I am teaching a subject to students, I have to introduce it to them, but they already come to class with a lot of knowledge about this. Well, a lot of it is based on TV and films, but many of them have also read mysteries. A lot of children's books take the form of mysteries in some ways. So it's a big part of our culture, and it's starting to get recognized for that.

One other thing I would say, stressing that point I made earlier, is that one of the things literary scholars do is study "how do we read" (literary theories about what do we determine is important, what do we talk about when we read), and, as I was saying before, detective literature models certain ways of reading. So if you want to talk about "how do we read," there's probably no better genre you can go to, to establish what we're doing when we read detective fiction.

Ms. Beard: Many popular movies and television programs are based on crime fiction. Is this just a reflection of the genre's overall popularity or are there other reasons for it?

Dr. Keirstead: I think that certainly is a reason, but there's got to be something more to it because there are an astounding number of police shows and films that are based on novels and sometimes vice versa (you might have a movie that later is turned into a novel). I think you could say the elements that make a great piece of detective fiction are usually elements that make a great film as well—a particularly evocative setting that the readers must absorb and understand, perhaps in order to interpret the crime and understand it, and a plot of course, a gripping plot with certain stages.

Another observation we could make is that detective plots probably lend themselves well to commercial breaks, because you get to certain stages in the narrative, the false suspect, the introduction of the crime, that allow for set stopping points. With a lot of television dramas, people began to notice that (I can't think of specific examples), but sometimes they would change things because they realized, oh, the true suspect is always revealed twenty-eight minutes into the show. So I think there's that part of it.

The two genres translate very well together, and not just in television, but in film as well. When you think of some of the great films, particularly from the Nineteen Forties, they, in many cases, grew out of the crime fiction of the period. *The Big Sleep* for instance became a film with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Other examples of what was called *film noir* in a lot of ways owe some of their great plots and settings to the crime fiction of the time.

Ms. Beard: Thank you for talking with us, Dr. Keirstead.

Dr. Keirstead: Thank you. It's been my pleasure.

Ms. Beard: We've been talking about crime fiction with Dr. Christopher Keirstead of the Auburn University Department of English. This audio program is produced for *This Goodly Land: Alabama's Literary Landscape*, a Web site connecting Alabama and its writers. You can find additional resources on this topic when you visit us at www.alabamaliterarymap.org.

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